The Mysterious Island

Jules Verne

About the author

Jules Verne (1828–1905) is sometimes considered to be the father of science fiction. At the age of 34, he wrote the adventure story Five Weeks in a Balloon which was quickly followed by the science fiction classic Journey to the Centre of the Earth, published in 1864. Verne’s skill was to weave an exciting adventure story around a fantastical idea which was supported by scientific knowledge or speculation.

Verne was fascinated by exploration – he even wrote a history of exploration from Phoenician times to the mid-19th century. In all his famous works, his characters use the latest ‘inventions’ to explore the moon, the ocean depths or the centre of the earth.

Amongst the inventions which he anticipated in his writings are flights into outer space, submarines, helicopters, air conditioning, guided missiles and motion pictures. His other science fiction works include From the Earth to the Moon and Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, in which Captain Nemo first appears.

Summary

When a balloon escaping from Richmond, Virginia, during the Civil War, is blown off course, comes down on the Pacific Ocean. One of its occupants, Cyrus Smith, falls or jumps off into the sea with his dog. The other occupants, three men and a boy, jump down on a beach. Cyrus Smith manages to make it to shore but has no idea how he has reached a cave half a mile from the sea.

Other mysterious things happen on the uninhabited island. After the men have made a list of things they need, a large box appears on the beach and inside are all the things they have listed. When pirates come to disturb them in their new cave house, their ship is torpedoed and sent to the bottom. Finally, when the boy, Herbert, falls sick, a medicine appears by his bed and so he is saved.

But their mysterious helper suddenly needs help of his own. He tells them how to find him – at the bottom of the deep well in their cave house. He is no other than Captain Nemo, anti-hero of another Jules Verne story, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. He is at the end of his life and he wants the men to take his riches and scuttle his submarine, Nautilus, after his death, with him on board. The friends spend a little longer on the island but are eventually rescued by a British survey ship, free at last to start or return to families, and write or tell of their adventures and their mysterious helper.

Chapters 1–3: Four men, a boy and a dog manage to escape the U.S. Civil War in a balloon on the very same day a strong wind causes great damage all around the world. By the time they see land again, one of them, Cyrus Smith, and his dog fall into the water. The other three men and the boy reach an island hoping Cyrus will join them soon. The first island they reach is too small, so they swim to a nearby island. They set out to find shelter and to see if Cyrus and his dog have made their way to the island. The following morning Top, the dog, finds them and takes them to the cave where Cyrus lies asleep. He feels weak because he has had to swim hard to reach the shore. What is a real mystery is how, being so weak, he managed to get to the place where the others find him.

Chapters 4–7: The four men and the boy quickly get organized to look for whatever they need to survive: at the beginning they eat eggs, fish and fruit from the trees. Then Pencroft, the seaman, makes bows and they add birds to their menu. One day Spillet, the journalist, writes out a list of the things which would make life easier, for example matches to start a fire in case the one they have made goes out. To their surprise, a month later, another mysterious event happens: they find a big box full of the things that were on the list. This makes life easier: they can all go away because now they have matches to light the fire. So the next morning they get as far south as a rock wall, and inside the rock they find a great cave. This one is better because it is clean and dry and a river runs through it. That night there is a storm on the island and when they go back to the beach cave they find nothing left but the box. They decide to move to the cave in the rock wall. Life in Cave House, their new home, is very pleasant indeed and they all get on well.
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Chapters 8–10: One evening the men see a pirate ship come near the beach. Pencroft goes to the ship secretly. He discovers that there are fifty pirates and they have guns. They shoot twice at the cave but a great wave breaks and sinks the ship. The men take several things from the ship and some time later Nab finds a strange object on the beach. It is part of a torpedo. They wonder who is helping them. One day Herbert falls ill and a bottle of medicine mysteriously appears on the table. He gets better soon. Months later, they see a note on the table: their helper wants them to see him because he is dying.

Chapters 11–13: The men go down into a bigger cave and find a boat, but they do not know where to go. Then a white light shines on a big object in the water, which Cyrus recognizes as Captain Nemo’s submarine, *Nautilus*. Nemo is an old dying man. He explains he is Indian and hates the British because they took India from its people. He gives Cyrus a box with money and trusts him to use it well. They have dinner together before doing as Nemo instructs. They must let the *Nautilus* sink when he dies, and take the money and the small boat with them. They use the boat to fish and explore until they are finally rescued by a ship. They go back to America to begin a new life.

The Original Text

*The Mysterious Island* is in fact a science fiction / fantasy rendition of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which was published in 1719. Verne wrote *The Mysterious Island* in 1872 and it was published two years later. *Crusoe* really launched an entire genre centred around people finding themselves marooned on dangerous islands and ultimately making the best of it.

Background and themes

*The Mysterious Island* turns out to be a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, but this only becomes evident at the end of the story. Up until the point where Captain Nemo reveals himself, it is the tale of a group of castaways, very much in the mould of *Robinson Crusoe*. The big difference is that, in this case, there is a mysterious helper. At first, this help has an almost mystical quality. Is Verne writing about the way God helps people in trouble? A man is carried to safety as if by magic. The castaways write notes of what they need – written prayers – and, soon after, all their needs are met – their prayers are answered. But then the help takes on a much more scientific form – the torpedoing of the pirates’ ship – and we move from mysticism to pure adventure.

There is one final twist. Captain Nemo is their helper. Although his very name means nobody in Latin, he is quite definitely somebody in this story – a person with a past fixed firmly in the recent history of the world for Verne’s readers. Most Frenchmen probably resented the breadth and influence of the British empire, but it is debatable how much the average Frenchman of 1875 cared about the Indian Mutiny of 1857, brutally put down by Britain. However, Verne clearly felt that these events gave Nemo good reason for his behaviour.

**Pirates:** As many colonies were thousands of miles from Europe, European monarchs could not afford to send their fleets to control the seas around them. Pirates patrolled the seas to steal and to mercilessly harass anyone who passed by.

**Historical events:** The Indian Rebellion of 1857 (or Sepoy rebellion), which some have seen as the first Indian war of independence, was a period of armed uprisings against colonial authority of the British East India Company in India. This rebellion brought about the end of the East India Company’s rule in India and the beginning of the British Raj, the 90 years during which the UK directly ruled the Indian subcontinent, although some states retained nominal independence under their respective Rajas, or kings.

Discussion activities

**Chapters 1–3**

**Before reading**
1. **Discuss:** An island
   Ask students to work in groups and to think of possible ways in which an island can be mysterious. Get ideas from each group.

2. **Discuss:** Have students discuss possible ways in which one can reach an island: by boat, by ship, etc.

3. **Write:** Ask students to continue to work in groups and to look at the list of words at the back of the book in section 2 of the ‘Before You Read’ Activities (Chapters 1–3). They must write a short story about a mysterious island which includes all those words.

**While reading**
4. **Discuss:** Flying a balloon
   Have students read pages 1 and 3 and discuss the following in pairs: Why did the four men take a balloon? Why was the box there with them? Why did they have to throw out bags? In your opinion, did Cyrus Smith fall into the sea or did he jump? If he jumped, why do you think he did that?
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Chapters 8–10

Before reading
15 Discuss: Have students discuss the following questions:
   The men find a good cave and make some things. What else do the men need? Can they stay on the island for a long time?

While reading
16 Role play: On page 22, Pencroft swims back to the cave after looking at the pirate ship. He tells the story to the other men. In groups, ask students to plan and then role play the conversation.

After reading
17 Write: Ask students to imagine they are one of the men on the island. They write in their notebooks after the pirates attack them. Begin:
   July 2nd: Yesterday evening, a pirate ship came near the island. They stayed the night …

Chapters 11–13

Before reading
19 Discuss: Divide the students into two groups: the yes group and the no group. Ask students in the former to give reasons why they have to meet the mysterious friend and those in the latter to say why they have to stay in their cave.

While reading
20 Research: Ask students to find out more about the Rebellion of 1857 and retell the situation in India from the point of view of a British soldier. You can ask them to begin like this: We went to India because the Indians were fighting the British there. They fought hard …

After reading
21 Discuss: Important objects
   Get students to discuss in pairs. In what way are these things important in the last chapter of the story?
   a Captain Nemo’s little boat
   b maps
   c smoke
   d families
   e stories

Chapters 4–7

Before reading
8 Predict: Have students speculate:
   What will Pencroft use a knife for?

While reading
9 Write: Have students read page 10 and imagine what things the men and the boy wanted to have on the island. Ask them to write out the list as Spillet did.

10 Role play: The cave on the beach
   Have students imagine the men’s conversation when they came back to the cave on the beach and found the floor was wet and their beds and fireplace were not there. Then get them to act it out.

11 Discuss: Changing weather
   Have students discuss how the changes in the weather in Chapters 6 and 7 affected the men’s lives.

12 Discuss: Have students discuss why the people in the story said the following:
   ‘We’ll make bows,’ Pencroft said.
   ‘Is this really happening?’ said Pencroft.
   ‘I’ll try to break more away,’ said Pencroft.
   ‘We’ll have to sleep here another night,’ said Cyrus.
   ‘We’ll always have to have food for three or four days in the cave,’ said Spillet.

After reading
13 Check what happened: Have students compare what they thought about the way Pencroft would use his knife (Activity 8) and what actually happens in the story.

14 Check: Have students answer the following questions:
   a What did the men use to catch birds?
   b What did they climb to the highest place on the island for?
   c What did they find in the heavy box?
   d What did they use to make lights and look in the cave in the rock wall?
   e What did they use to climb into and out of the great cave in the rock wall?

After reading
7 Discuss: The mysterious island
   Have students read Chapter 3 and discuss what mysterious things happen.

6 Role play: After reading page 6, have students work in pairs and imagine the conversation among the three men and the boy when they felt sad because they didn’t find any sign of Cyrus or Top. Then ask them to act it out.

After reading
8 Write: Ask the students to complete Spillet’s notebook: March 5th, 1865. I am not in Richmond, Virginia now, but on an island in the Pacific Ocean with two men and a boy. The other man, Cyrus, and his dog fell into the sea when …